

Bahrain

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Bahrain's long-running effort to bring together progovernment and opposition sides in reconciliation talks broke down in January 2014 for a second time. Suspension of the so-called National Dialogue, which has been running off and on since 2011, followed the withdrawal of the leading opposition society, Al-Wefaq, from discussions after the arrest of several of its leading members in late 2013. Al-Wefaq announced that it would boycott the November 2014 parliamentary elections, and this, along with government electoral tinkering, resulted in progovernment candidates winning a sweeping parliamentary victory.

The government continued to harass the country's majority Shiite population, violently responding to protests and routinely arresting prominent dissidents. In December 2014, authorities arrested the country's main opposition figure, president of Al-Wefaq Ali Salman, on charges of inciting violence and supporting the overthrow of the government.

Clashes between political protesters and authorities continued. Police brutality, including systemic detention, torture, and widespread arrests, went on unabated. Attacks against police by protesters also escalated, including the more frequent use of homemade bombs and car bombs. Authorities continued to detain prominent activists, and Bahraini journalists and others face ongoing restrictions on freedom of speech.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties:

Political Rights: 5 / 40 (-1) [Key]

A. Electoral Process: 2 / 12 (-1)

The National Action Charter of Bahrain was approved in 2001, and the country was proclaimed a constitutional kingdom the following year. The 2002 constitution gives the king power over the executive, legislative, and judicial authorities. He appoints cabinet ministers and members of the 40-seat Consultative Council, the upper house of the National Assembly. The lower house, or Council of Representatives, consists of 40 elected members serving four-year terms. The National Assembly may propose legislation, but the cabinet drafts the laws.

Bahrain's main Shiite opposition society, Al-Wefaq, withdrew its 18 members from the Council of Representatives in 2011 and boycotted the interim elections to protest the government's crackdown on Shiite Muslims. As a result, all 40 seats went to government supporters. Al-Wefaq again boycotted the November 2014 legislative elections, allowing progovernment candidates to sweep parliament again. Largely progovernment independents won 37 of the 40 lower house seats. The remaining 3 seats went to major Sunni societies.

The government touted the November 2014 elections as a success, with a reported 51.5 percent voter turnout for the first-round of parliamentary elections in spite of the Shiite

Muslim boycott. However, Al-Wefaq estimated voter turnout at less than 30 percent. The government appears to have manipulated the vote by redrawing electoral districts and making polling station monitoring more difficult in order to undercut the rise of potentially populist political networks, such as Islamist groups.

B. Political Pluralism and Participation: 2 / 16

While formal political parties are illegal, the government has generally allowed political societies or groupings to operate. A 2005 law makes it illegal to form political associations based on class, profession, or religion, and requires all political associations to register with the Ministry of Justice. Bahrain has been in political crisis since 2011, when Bahraini activists, mostly from economically depressed Shiite communities, galvanized widespread support for political reform and to end sectarian discrimination. The government declared martial law in response to the uprising and instituted a prolonged and violent crackdown.

While the government claims that political societies remain free to operate, it has imprisoned key opposition leaders. Hassan Mushaima (Haq), Ibrahim Sharif (Democratic Action Society), and Abduljalil al-Singace (Haq) were sentenced to life in prison for their activism. The government continued to pressure opposition figures in 2014. Al-Wefaq president Salman was cleared of charges of inciting hatred and spreading false news after his 2013 arrest, but in December 2014 he was rearrested, charged with inciting unrest, and banned from traveling.

The government relaunched the National Dialogue in February 2013 in an attempt to reengage the opposition in the political process, but then suspended it in February 2014 after Al-Wefaq withdrew from talks following the arrest of Khalil Marzooq for criticizing the government. Marzooq, a leading Al-Wefaq figure, was acquitted in June 2014, a decision that came too late to rescue the reconciliation talks. After Al-Wefaq announced it would boycott the November 2014 parliamentary elections, a Bahraini court suspended the society's operations for three months.

The majority Shiite population is underrepresented in government.

C. Functioning of Government: 3 / 12

Bahrain has some anticorruption laws, but enforcement is weak, and high-ranking officials suspected of corruption are rarely punished. A source of frustration for many citizens is the perception that Khalifa bin Salman al-Khalifa, the king's uncle and Bahrain's prime minister since 1971, is both corrupt and a key opponent of reform.

A British investigation into illicit payments allegedly made by a British-Canadian citizen to Aluminum Bahrain in 2013 was dropped, although it is widely believed that the payments occurred and that the Bahraini prime minister was aware of them and possibly involved.

Bahrain was ranked 55 out of 175 countries and territories surveyed in Transparency International's 2014 Corruption Perceptions Index.

Discretionary Political Rights Question B: -2 / 0

The government has worked to erode the Shiite majority, mostly by granting citizenship to foreign-born Sunnis. In 2014, the government continued its systematic sectarian discrimination and recruitment of foreign Sunnis to take up Bahraini citizenship and serve in the country's security services. Since 2011, the government has maintained a heavy security presence in primarily Shiite villages. Security forces restrict the movements of Shiite citizens, periodically destroying property, and continuing to arrest government critics and activists.

Civil Liberties: 10 / 60

D. Freedom of Expression and Belief: 2 / 16

The government owns all broadcast media outlets, and the private owners of Bahrain's three main newspapers have close ties to the state. Self-censorship is encouraged by the vaguely worded 2002 Press Law, which allows the state to imprison journalists for criticizing the king or Islam or for threatening national security. In February 2014, the king enacted a law that criminalized insults against him, which carries a prison term of up to seven years and steep fees.

The government and its supporters have used the press to smear human rights and opposition activists repeatedly since 2011, most notably in separate campaigns against the former opposition newspaper *Al-Wasaf* and its editor, Mansoor al-Jamri. Several prominent activists were targeted in 2014, including Zainab al-Khawaja, a daughter of the imprisoned high-profile activist Abdulhadi al-Khawaja. Zainab had been arrested in 2013 for criticizing the government, was later released, and then was rearrested in 2014 for defiance of the government's ban on criticism. She received a four-year sentence for tearing up a picture of King Hamad. Photojournalist Ahmad Humaidan was sentenced to 10 years in prison in March 2014 for his participation in 2012 protests, and the photographer Hussain Hubail, who was arrested in 2013 in advance of demonstrations, was given a five-year prison sentence.

The government continues to block a number of opposition websites, including those that broadcast live events, such as protests. Former president of the Bahrain Center for Human Rights Nabeel Rajab was arrested in 2012 for criticizing the government on Twitter; after his release in early 2014, he was arrested again in October for further critical tweets.

Islam is the state religion. However, non-Muslim minorities are generally free to practice their faiths. All religious groups must obtain a permit from the Ministry of Justice and Islamic Affairs to operate legally, though the government has not punished groups that operate without a permit.

The government continued repression of Shiite religious and political figures in 2014. In January, a Bahraini court officially banned the prominent Islamic Scholars Council following a Ministry of Justice lawsuit that it was an illegal society.

Academic freedom is not formally restricted, but scholars who criticize the government are subject to dismissal. In 2011, a number of faculty and administrators were fired for supporting the call for democracy, and hundreds of students and some faculty were expelled. Those who remained were forced to sign loyalty pledges.

E. Associational and Organizational Rights: 1 / 12

Citizens must obtain a license to hold demonstrations, which are banned from sunrise to sunset in any public arena. Police regularly use violence to break up political protests, most of which occur in Shiite villages. In July 2013, in face of ongoing protests and rising levels of violence, King Hamad decreed additions to Bahrain's antiterrorism law that imposed heavy penalties on those convicted of demonstrating unlawfully, including large fines and the stripping of citizenship. Several protesters were killed by police in 2014, including 14-year-old Muhammed Mohsen in Sitra in April. The government continues to target children, regularly arresting and detaining minors. Courts sentenced dozens of protesters to long prison terms for illegally protesting or on suspicion of complicity in bomb attacks. Political activist Mohammad al-Maskati was sentenced to six months in prison in December 2014 for participation in a 2012 protest.

The 1989 Societies Law prohibits any nongovernmental organization (NGO) from operating without a permit. In 2013 the government cancelled a visit by the UN special rapporteur on torture. Authorities questioned Al-Wefaq's Salman and Marzooq in July 2014 after they met with U.S. assistant secretary of state for democracy, human rights, and labor Tom Malinowski; the government requested that Malinowski leave the country. In September, the Ministry of Justice ordered all groups to obtain government permission before meeting with non-Bahraini diplomats and officials, limiting the contact of opposition and human rights networks with potentially supportive foreign governments and international organizations. The order also required a government official to be present at any interaction.

Bahraini human rights defenders continued to be targeted. Maryam al-Khawaja, head of the Bahrain Center for Human Rights, was arrested upon returning from exile to visit her ailing father, Abdulhadi al-Khawaja. She likely faces a prison sentence.

Bahrainis have the right to establish independent labor unions, but workers must give two weeks' notice before a strike, and strikes are banned in a variety of economic sectors. Private-sector employees cannot be dismissed for union activities, but harassment of unionist workers occurs in practice. Foreign workers lack the right to organize or seek help from Bahraini unions. Household servants remain particularly vulnerable to exploitation.

F. Rule of Law: 1 / 16

The king appoints all judges, and courts have been subject to government pressure. Members of the royal family hold all senior security-related offices. Bahrain's antiterrorism law prescribes the death penalty for members of terrorist groups and prison terms for those who use religion to spread extremism. Critics have argued that the law's definition of terrorist crimes is too broad, and that it has encouraged the use of torture and arbitrary detention.

Bahrain's criminal courts and those responsible for personal status laws are largely beholden to political interests. The country's judicial system is seen as corrupt and biased in favor of the ruling family and its backers. Although Bahrain has criminalized torture and claims it does not hold political prisoners, its prisons are full of human rights and prodemocracy activists. While some detainees are periodically denied access to family and lawyers, others enjoy limited opportunities for phone calls and other amenities. Prisoners report frequent rough treatment. In August 2014, prisoners at the Dry Dock prison on the island of Muharraq rioted over poor conditions and for being denied family visits; more than 40 prisoners were injured during the protest. In February, Jaafar Muhammed Jaafar died under mysterious circumstances, likely from torture, while imprisoned.

In 2011, the Bahrain Independent Commission of Inquiry (BICI) concluded that security personnel had used excessive force during the 2011 government crackdown. In 2013, at the recommendation of BICI, the government created a police ombudsman to investigate allegations of brutality and the excessive use of force by security personnel. While several police officers were sentenced to prison terms as a result, including one who received seven years for killing a protester in 2011, sentences for those convicted of killing protesters have been light compared to those for political activists.

Protesters in 2014 were accused of detonating a series of car bombs targeting police, leading to several police deaths and injuries. Government authorities claim that protesters have been attempting to smuggle weapons into the country from Iraq.

Shiites face various forms of discrimination. Fears of Shiite power and suspicions about their loyalties have limited employment opportunities for young Shiite men and fueled government attempts to erode the Shiite majority.

Discrimination based on sexual orientation is common, and most LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) people hide their gender identity. Same-sex sexual activity is not illegal, yet individuals have reportedly been punished for it.

G. Personal Autonomy and Individual Rights: 6 / 16

The government continued to obstruct foreign travel by key opposition figures and activists in 2014. Authorities also restricted movement inside the country, particularly for residents of largely Shiite villages outside Manama. A tight security cordon blocked easy access to the capital.

Although registered businesses are largely free to operate, obtaining approval can be difficult due to high capital requirements and political influence on the economy. Among the wealthy elites that dominate the business sector, property rights are generally respected and expropriation is rare. However, Shiite citizens encounter difficulties and in some cases bans on purchasing housing and land. The al-Khalifa family has gifted vast swaths of land to regime cronies.

Although women have the right to vote and participate in elections, they are underrepresented politically. Women won three parliamentary seats in 2014 elections. Women are generally not afforded equal protection under the law. The government drafted a personal status law in 2008, but withdrew it in 2009 under pressure from Shiite clergy; the Sunni portion was later passed by parliament. Personal status and family law issues for Shiite Bahrainis are consequently still governed by Sharia (Islamic law) court rulings based on the interpretations of predominantly male religious scholars, rather than by any formal statute.

Scoring Key: X / Y (Z)**X = Score Received****Y = Best Possible Score****Z = Change from Previous Year****Full Methodology**